

THE DIRECTOR OF
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The plight of Poland's sick children . . .

Poland appears and disappears in the headlines but the day-to-day struggle goes on, with the deteriorating situation bearing hardest on the young children and the sick. MARY CRAIG, who recently went into Poland on one of the lorries taking vitally needed medical aid from Britain, writes of what she saw.

IT IS not easy being a new mother in Poland these days. Kitting out a baby costs three times the average monthly wage and this, even though a woman is entitled to 80 per cent. of her former pay for three years, is prohibitive since almost all prices have soared from between 400 and 600 per cent.

The hospitals, where most women have their babies, are appallingly overcrowded, badly-equipped and under-staffed. And, as one doctor in a Crakow hospital admitted recently, "We have no hope of things getting better."

Babies lie sometimes two to a cot or twelve in a four-bedded ward; bottles, milk foods and nappies are virtually unobtainable; TB is on the rise; rickets, that long-forgotten bone disease caused by lack of vitamins, is back on the scene but the vitamin needed to combat it is not available. The infant mortality rate is rising surely (from 22 per thousand births in 1979 to 29 per thousand in 1982) and were it not for the dedication and skill of the over-worked doctors and nurses it would have risen still further.

Mother, who cannot breastfeed, conduct a weary search for baby-food. The one and only Polish variety gives the babies diarrhoea; the necessary soya-milk substitutes come from abroad and are very scarce.

Nappies and baby-clothes are on ration or coupons, and hard to find. Several times I passed lines of bedraggled women queuing in the rain for children's clothes.

The overcrowding in the hospitals passes the bounds of belief. In the children's surgical department of a large Warsaw teaching hospital I saw 40 children in four small airless wards, airless because no one dares open windows and let in more dirt. As it is, there are no deterrents to keep the place clean, a lack which has forced more than one hospital to close. This hospital specialises in heart-surgery, but in the absence of almost everything, from antiseptics to swabs, can perform only two operations a week instead of the vital two a day.

Miraculously there are no bed sores, and the children do not look ill-cared-for. The doctors' ingenuity is strained to the uttermost, sometimes beyond the limit. But, in spite of their best efforts, post-operative infection of the upper respiratory tract is on the increase, with few antibiotics available to contain it. Scabies and lice are common, and the growing incidence of hepatitis can surely not be unconnected to the inescapable re-usage of disposable needles and syringes during surgery. The doctors sound a note of despair. "Please don't be too hard on us," one of them begged. "We do what we can, but that is not enough."



Cookware w

AS PART of their Hongk Harrods have a consignment of utensils and cooking equipment Shop including this unusual Mc

This charcoal-burning utensil meat, which is dipped into the six copper wire scoops provided. ally-styled brass pot costs £32 picture (by PAUL ARMIGER) shaped steamer, £5.50; meat Chinese oven glove, £1.50, from tion of utensils which includes bamboo brushes, lacquered tempura racks and wok rings.